

Unpacking the complexity in practice (-research): the contribution of  
participant observation and a multistakeholder-perspective

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The move towards evidence-based practice has been accompanied by a lot of resistance inside the social work profession. Researchers are criticized that their research projects don't take into account the complexity, uncertainty and doubt that is inherent to social work. Practitioners are criticized that they fail to implement the findings from academic research. To close this gap, new concepts as 'co-creation' and 'mode 2 knowledge production' and a realist perspective entered the discipline of evaluation research. However, arguments about which particular methods can be applied and the possibilities and barriers of these methods are rather rare. Inspired by the insights of responsive evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Abma, 2005; Abma & Widdershioven, 2008; Abma & Widdershioven, 2011) this presentation will focus on the added value of participant observation combined with a multistakeholder-perspective in the area of evaluation research. Within a partnership between the University of Leuven and a social service agency, 46 homevisits were observed and used as a departure point for a negotiation process with multiple stakeholders (practitioners, users, managers, policy makers and researchers). Insights in how and why a program and its various components are successful (like the impact of the 'tuning' between a practitioner and a family, the power-dynamics between different program-actors, ...) were carefully gathered and embedded in a broad view of evidence based practice (Hermans, 2008). During the presentation the chances, pitfalls and bottlenecks of our method will be discussed and embedded in a broader discourse of different types of knowledge, knowledge creation and power dynamics.

